



Sowing the Wind? Reaping the Crop of Bólstaðr

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Contents

- 5 Contributors
- 7 Professor Emeritus Duncan M. Mennie (1909 – 1998) (Irene Scobbie)
- 11 *M. A. MacLeod*
The Moot Question of Urbanism:
Recent Excavations at Birka
- 25 *Peder Gammeltoft*
Sowing the wind? Reaping the crop of *bólstaðr*
- 37 *Andrew Jennings*
Iona and the Vikings: Survival and Continuity
- 55 *Malcolm Bangor-Jones*
'Abounding with people of dyvers languages':
The Church and Gaelic in the Presbytery
of Caithness in the Second Half of the 17th Century
- 67 *T. Neighbour* (with contributions by *T. Cowie, S. Boardman and C. Rushe*)
Excavation of a Presumed Round House and
Associated Features at Priesthill Farm, near Delny,
Ross and Cromarty District, Highland Region, 1993

Reviews

- 93 Bjarne Stoklund, *Det Færøske Hus i Kulturhistorisk Belysning* (Barbara E. Crawford)
- 96 Michael P. Barnes, *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland* (Arne Kruse)

Sowing the wind? Reaping the crop of
bólstaðr

Sowing

When I started my PhD-project on names whose generic originated from ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper*,¹ I was somewhat puzzled by the fact that this place-name element, one of the most central place-name generics of the Viking Age and later, had received as little attention as it had. ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* was usually either referred to in the most general terms, or it was regarded almost as an inferior place-name generic in relation to other generics of the Viking Age.² Scholars usually never got beyond explaining ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* as 'a farm'.³ However, since there are numerous other place-name generics that convey the same meaning, I have never found this interpretation entirely satisfactory. Therefore, I set out to clear this mystery up once and for all. Little did I realise that I had sown the wind...

It soon became clear to me that with ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* we are talking about not one possible interpretation but no less than four at least. To me, ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* may mean: *a farm, a farm created as the result of a division of a larger unit into smaller portions, an area of land belonging to a farm, a resting-place/lair for animals*. As I see it, it is possible to find these four interpretations in various examples in the corpus of 450 or so place-names I am using for my PhD-project. One of the major reasons for this large array of meanings is probably the popularity of the generic. Firstly, the generic was productive from at least the beginning of the Viking Age to far into the medieval period. This long productivity probably gave the generic time enough to branch out and grow in range of application. Secondly, this large temporal span of popularity is partly also responsible for the

vast area of application, ranging from Iceland in the west to Finland in the east and from as far south as the Isle of Man to northern Norway (see Fig. 1).

Furthermore, it would be a fallacy to view any place-name element as fixed in time and space. Any part of the onomasticon is alive at any given time, in so far as any element is always under pressure to change from external factors. New associations, analogies, differences in administration, topography and life in general, etc., may spur an onomastic entity either to branch out or to wither in meaning. To me, this constant moulding and shaping by external factors is one of the other major reasons for the plurality of meaning of ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper*.

Growing

We have now established a framework of a large temporal and spatial application, as well as a plurality of meaning, as lying behind place-names in ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper*. Let us now concentrate on establishing how and where the various meanings of ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* manifest themselves.

There are a number of parameters which may help in our search. Firstly, there is the documentary evidence which may show the appellative function of a generic at a given time. This could help to give some indication as to what motives for naming lie behind a generic at the said time. Unfortunately, our documentary sources are restricted to the later medieval period. This parameter, therefore, is rather less than secure here. Secondly, we also have the rather more uncertain physical situation and distribution to rely on. This parameter is not very reliable, as the physical conditions we see today may not have been the same at the time of naming, which means that the findings here can only be accepted with some reservation.

To return to the documentary evidence: what does this tell us about ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper*? The medieval Norwegian, Swedish and Icelandic sources all usually convey the general meaning of 'a farm'.⁴ The Swedish sources,

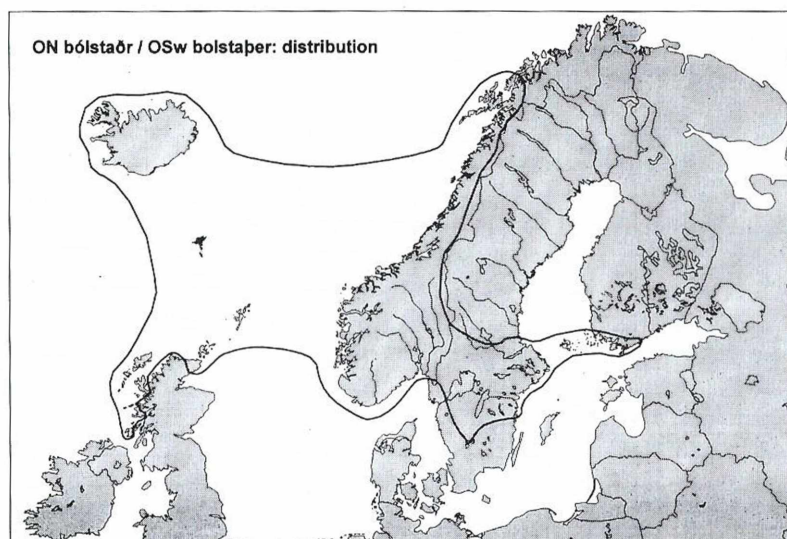


Fig. 1 A map of the distribution of ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaþer*.

furthermore, also have OSw *bolstaþer* figuring in the more specialised meaning of 'an area of land belonging to a farm'. In fact, this function is used to create such constructions as *Sundbybolstadhe*, which is best translated as: 'the area of land belonging to *Sundby*'.⁵ However, no such names exist in Sweden today. This seems to suggest that these names did not exist outside the legal context in which they were written at the time. The meaning had seemingly not yet entered into the onomasticon of the general public.

If we go on to look at the physical situation of places with names in ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaþer*, we find that there are three main distinctions to be made as to what this name-type refers: 1) settlements; 2) fields/groups of fields; 3) shelters. Those referring to settlements are found throughout the entire area. The settlements whose names contain ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaþer* are typically single farmsteads or small groups of farms. In their situation compared with other settlements and within a township, they mostly occupy a secondary position. They are often found at one end of a township (see Fig. 2) or between two townships. It is as such the Norwegian and Swedish examples usually occur. The Norwegian and Swedish examples are hardly ever found in pairs. If these observations are correct, then a meaning more specialised than simply 'a farm' may be hinted at. The Norwegian scholar Magnus Olsen was of the conviction that ON *bólstaðr* referred to a place where several plots of land, or *ból*, were sufficiently large to support a farm. During the Viking Age and later, the social conditions and heritage system often caused already existing farms to be split up into smaller portions. It was this fact that, according to Olsen, was the driving force behind the use of this name element.⁶ Certainly, there is nothing in his thesis that contradicts what may be deduced from the physical situation, and I believe that he is generally right, at least in a Norwegian and Swedish context.

If we go to the colonial environments, we see that the Scottish examples behave in much the same way as their Norwegian counterparts. The major difference is that the Scottish settlements with names in ON *bólstaðr* are often found bordering on each other within the same township (see

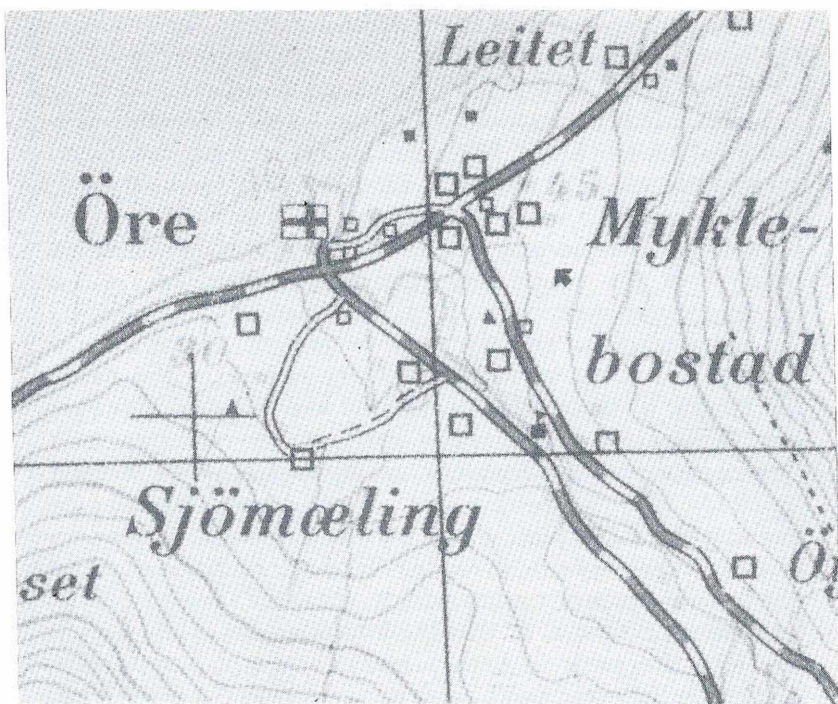


Fig. 2 A typical example of a Norwegian *bólstaðr* place-name, *Myklebostad* in the village of Øre in Møre and Romsdal fylke (NGO Series M7II, sheet 1320 I). *Myklebostad* occupies a large tract at the northern end of the village. Its location is secondary to Øre, being situated on higher ground at a distance from the main water course and the natural harbour.

Fig. 3). This would seem to suggest that the specialised meaning referring to the splitting up of a farm to create new ones is valid here also – to the point of being emphasised even more. Nevertheless, I feel we should be careful about transferring this idea, lock, stock and barrel, from a Norwegian environment to the Scottish setting. For instance, I believe a certain amount of analogical naming may have occurred in the case of the Scottish names – especially when we take into consideration that certain specific elements occur only in limited areas. When analogical naming occurs, the original meaning of a name is rendered void, in so far as the motives guiding analogical naming are associative and not denotative as is normal. The safest thing to do here is to say that both the original settlement meaning as well as analogical naming can have been in use here.

The Icelandic and Finnish settlement examples also display the same general secondary nature as the names pertaining to settlements in Norway and Sweden. However, this is where the similarities between the two areas end. Where many of the Icelandic examples are of the *Breiða-bólstaðr* type, suggesting that a high degree of analogical naming has taken place there, the Finnish examples are very varied in their specific inventory. In short, it can be said that the Icelandic names, unsurprisingly, show the same tendencies as those in Scotland, so that the interpretation of the generic must be the same in both places. The Finnish settlement names, on the other hand, seem to have preserved the original significance to a large extent.

The names pertaining to fields/areas of land are found only in the Swedish-influenced areas of Finland. This is not really surprising when we take into consideration that this application was typically east Scandinavian. The fact that it has survived only in Finland and not in Sweden has probably to do with its late application. The fact that the typical field-name in OSw *bolstaper* usually has the definite article suffixed to the name (*-bolstan*, *-borsten*) certainly seems to suggest a lateness in coining. The location of names of this type is usually that of a group of outfields at one end of a township. It has been suggested⁷ that this application for OSw *bolstaper*

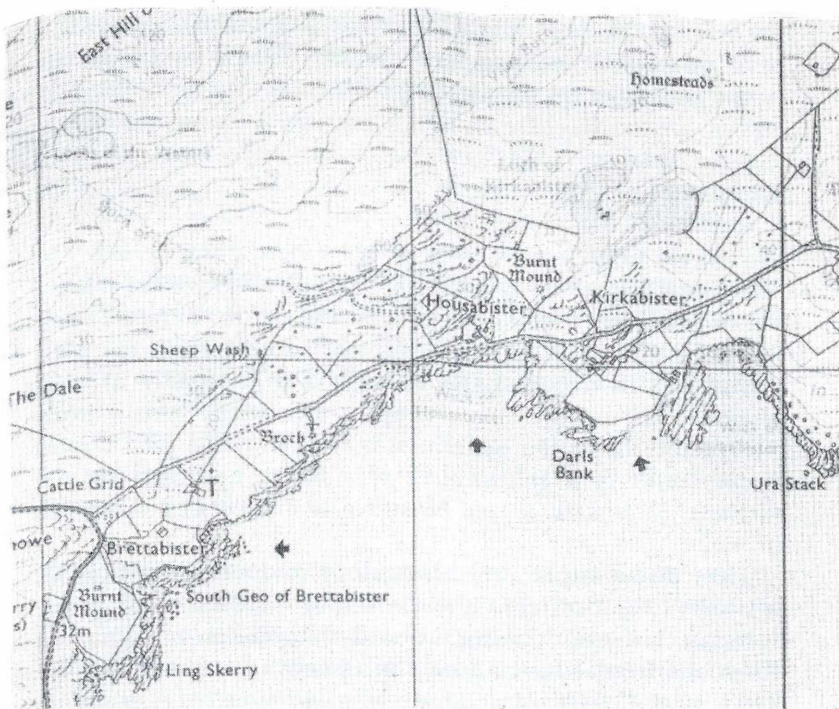


Fig. 3 The farms of *Brettabister*, *Housabister* and *Kirkabister* in Nesting, Shetland, are fine examples of settlements with place-names in ON *bólstaðr* bordering on each other (OS Pathfinder Series, sheet 15).

referred to land held in common by the township, and taxed with it. I think this interpretation works well with the actual situation.

The final type is the one referring to shelters. This type is attested only once in the name *Bólstaður*, on Nólsey in the Faroes. The site is remote and the only man-made feature there is a V-shaped dyke. The name is commonly referred to as '*a place where cows can seek shelter*'. This is a strange use of the generic and I suspect rather late.

Reaping

We have now established that, when considering the interpretation of ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper*, we are talking not of one application of this generic, but of four different ones. We have also seen how the different applications manifest themselves in documentary sources and especially in their physical situation. To recapitulate what these four interpretations of the generic are: 1) *a farm*; 2) *a farm created as the result of a splitting up of a larger unit into smaller portions*; 3) *an area of land belonging to a farm*; 4) *a shelter for animals*.

How do we explain the chronology or development of ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* into these four different uses? In my opinion, we are looking at a development in different directions from a specialised concept of '*a farm created as the result of a division of a larger unit into smaller ones*'. This motive seems to have been more or less the guiding one throughout the ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* area. From then on it developed in different directions: in west Scandinavian ON *bólstaðr* seems gradually to have acquired a general meaning of '*farm*', especially in the colonies (but it may also have been current in Norway and Sweden and there really is little way of telling). The generic seems to have been productive for a relatively short period, as the development of the generic is not very great as such. The Faroese *Bólstaður* falls, I think, completely outside this discussion. The interpretation points rather to Faroese *staður*, m. '*a place*', being added to Faroese

ból, n. 'a resting place/a lair for cattle' > 'place of the cattle lair', than being a 'genuine' *bólstaðr* name.

The east Scandinavian OSw *bolstaper* probably kept its original specialised meaning in the onomasticon for a considerable time. This can be seen from the fact that this notion generally seems to be inherent in the Finnish settlements with names from OSw *bolstaper* which were coined during the 12th century at the earliest.⁸ However, OSw *bolstaper* also remained a productive appellative, whose meaning at some stage seems to have shifted towards a legal term for land belonging to a farm. This term had currency throughout central Sweden but somehow only gained common acceptance as part of the onomasticon in Swedish-Finnish areas.

With this short article I hope to have shown not only the problems of analysis for ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper* but also that it is possible to reap a tolerable harvest of analysis by careful attention to detail, without losing too much to the whirlwind of time.

Notes

1. The purpose of my PhD-project is to collect a database of all known names in ON *bólstaðr*/OSw *bolstaper*, with the aim of examining the development of this generic from being a local central Scandinavian name-type to being the most widespread place-name generic in the North Atlantic area, especially Scotland – as well as being used in other Scandinavian colonies. Part of the project will be an in-depth study of the development of, and change in, the specific inventory in the new environments. Another part of the project is to analyse the preferred situation of *bólstaðr* settlements in the topography and in relation to other settlement types. Extra-onomastic information such as archaeology, soil quality, soil type, geology, distance from the sea, distance from water, slopes, etc. will be employed, partly to assess the 'usability' of these parameters for analysis, and partly to be able to give some

sort of indication as to whatever motives lie behind using *bólstaðr* as a place-name generic, should the parameters turn out to be useful. Ideally, this extra-onomastic analysis should extend to all names collected, but because of the sheer number of place-names found, I have chosen to concentrate on two specific areas, namely Shetland and the county of Møre and Romsdal in Norway. These two areas should provide us with sufficient indications as to whether naming traditions and settlement patterns did change from the country of origin to the colonies or not.

2. Cf. Linde, G., *Studier över de svenska stannamnen* (Uppsala: 1951), pp. 266-7.
3. Cf. e.g. Stewart, John, *Shetland Place-Names* (Lerwick: 1982), p. 52; Marwick, Hugh, *Orkney Farm names* (Kirkwall: 1952), p. 232; Nicolaisen, W.F.H., *Scottish place-names* (London: 1976), p. 92, etc.
4. Cf. e.g. *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, vol. VI, no. 484, Lockne, 19. Feb. 1441: '...Thy skal iach thet forscripna halfua Skuto med allom tillaghom undan mik og minom arfwom och vndir Gregers oc hans arfwa til æwerdelica ægho om alle rettogheet som then *boolstadene* bør a fylghia...' (Transl.: '...Then I shall [cede] the above mentioned one half of Skute with all appurtenances from me and my heirs to Gregers and his heirs for everlasting ownership with all rights belonging to that *farm* [of Skute]...'); *Diplomatarium Suecanum*, New Series, vol. II, 115: '...the godhe men...sagdo at engin ok then delin I akren la til ther *bolstadh*. (Transl.: '...the honest men...said that the meadow and that part of the land belonged to their farm.')
5. Cf. Söderwall, K.F., *Ordbok över svenska medeltids-språket* (Lund: 1884-1918), vol. 1, p. 133. OSw *bolstaþer* should in this construction be seen as a reinforcing epexegetic element describing the entire locality of *Sundby*, including the land belonging to it. A number of similar constructions are found in e.g. the *Diplomatarium Suecanum* (SD), which mentions places like *hubstabostad* (SD 2, 104 (1291)), *norboabolstad* (SD 2, 115 (1291)), *thormunzstæ bolstad* (ibid.)

6. Olsen, Magnus, *Ættegård og helligdom* (Oslo: 1926), pp. 47-8.
7. Harling-Kranck, Gunilla, *Namn på åkrar, ängar och hagar* (Helsingfors: 1990), p. 91.
8. Hellberg, Lars, *Ortnamnen och den svenska bosättningen på Åland* (Helsingfors: 1987), p. 46